

Bald Glyphs & Psychic Maps: An Examination of Sylvia Plath's

"Sheep in Fog"

Rehan Qayoom

Ted Hughes in his *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being* isolated and analysed the mythic and symbolic constants of the tragic sequence – the fifteen plays from *As You Like It* to *The Tempest* – with the understanding of, not only a great poet (for Auden, Eliot, Joyce, and countless others have had their say on Shakespeare), but also of someone who was no stranger to tragedy himself, – the most shattering, appalling tragedy, not once, but twice, – and had been forced as a consequence to make, as a means to self-survival, the "emergency flight of the shaman" (his own term), or Journey of the Hero, or Ring/Grail Quest, to the pit of the world that lies unseen below the surface of things. (Buhagiar 2)

Sylvia Plath's little-discussed poem "Sheep in Fog" was written on December 2, 1962, at Court Green. A final verse was added to it (five weeks after the composition of "Ariel") on January 28, 1963, at her Fitzroy Road flat in London. It is a bleak poem in which the only sheep are to be found in the title. The poem is a result of Plath's capacity to go out of her confusion beyond the limits of perception (what Hughes would call a shamanic flight) by taking off on the "near sheer vertical 'Ariel' climb"¹: the lynchpin of the book of that title. It is an anti-"Ariel" poem, telling the story of Ariel by adding to it the story of Phaeton.



The retelling (influence) of the Phaeton myth in "Ariel" continues into the third verse of "Sheep in Fog" as Plath *melts* Breughel's Icarus painting into the poem. Both played an obsessive minatory role in Plath's imagery. Hughes tells us that the painting hung on her wall at university and that Auden's poem on it "Musée des Beaux Arts"

¹ Hughes, Ted. To Craig Raine, November 13, 1989. *Letters of Ted Hughes*. 569.

was her favourite Auden poem. Both the verbs, both nouns and all three "of the mysteriously affecting adjectives" (Hughes, *Winter Pollen* 207) in verse five recall the Icarus myth.² Hughes outlines Plath's psychic map through identification of "- the DNA of her poetic metabolism" (Hughes, *Letters of Ted Hughes* 568) by describing what was happening in those drafts:

...the rider lies dead on the earth – which is the ruins of a chariot. (Sheep In Fog is the only other poem about riding that same horse ARIEL.) The whole myth – chariot, dead sun-child who is also the Sun the Father – ghost ride into the underworld – is literally here in the drafts. So the poem is the cortege of the funeral of the whole Ariel enterprise. (569)³

The unnamed sheep in the original fifth verse carry an air of the Nativity, the poem *was* written in December.⁴ Hughes connected this verse to Plath's interest in the myth of Phaeton and his chariot as she *wrestles* with cancellations and revisions in her drafts. In the poem (which can be taken as a lament for Phaeton) the train becomes the chariot, the "blackening," dead man "A flower left out" (Plath, *Collected Poems* 262). Plath had great faith in what is seen through the corner of one's eye. E. M. Forster wrote "Only what is seen sideways sinks deep" and, as Emily Dickinson said:

Tell all the Truth but tell it slant -
Success in Circuit lies
Too bright for our infirm Delight
The Truth's superb surprise

As Lightening to the Children eased
With explanation kind

² Pieter Bruegel. *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus*. The painting previously thought to be by Breugel has recently been contested and is now believed to be an early copy of Breugel's original. There is also a poem called "Landscape with the Fall of Icarus" by the American poet William Carlos Williams on the same painting.

³ Hughes' analysis of the poem has been described by several notable writers as one of the best accounts of the genesis of a poem. Roy Davids describes it as "one of the best pieces he has ever written on Sylvia's work and genius," and goes on to say:

Ted's essay is, moreover, one of the most penetrating exposures of the poetic impulse and the processes by which poems come or are dragged into being, common to the experience, he generously suggests, of all poets, at various times. (Davids)

See also Tim Kendall's *Sylvia Plath: A Critical Study*. Paul Mitchell even suggests a Lacanian interpretation of Hughes' analysis in *Sylvia Plath: The Poetry of Negativity*.

⁴ Auden cleverly uses the spelling "Brueghel" in his poem. Nativity paintings by Bruegel (such as *The Numbering at Bethlehem*) seem to inspire some of the related images in the poem. Indeed, he pointed out that the poem was inspired by two pictures, *Winter Landscape with Skaters & a Bird Trap* and *The Massacre of the Innocents*. He may well have been confused by the two names. See John Fuller's *W. H. Auden: A Commentary* for a detailed discussion.

The Truth must dazzle gradually
Or every man be blind. (494)

Both "Ariel" and "Sheep in Fog" are set on Dartmoor at the same time of day (dawn), on the same horse, riding over the same moor. The second verse of "Sheep in Fog" is almost Hardy-esque, the subject inverted as the rust-coloured train/horse becomes animalistic, leaving a line of breath. By which time the inversion or contrast of values has already occurred within as well as between "Sheep in Fog" and "Ariel." Hughes says that the drafts explicitly reveal "Sheep in Fog" to be an elegy of lament for the ecstasy of the "Ariel" mood:

In the draft corrections of this later poem, descriptions of the vast wreckage of a mythic chariot repeatedly emerge and are repeatedly suppressed, finally settling into the realistic 'train' and the 'rust' colour of her horse.

None of this, in these two poems, could be called pedagogic culture ornament, or a dip into the myth-kitty. Nothing in the drafts of the earlier poem, "Ariel", suggests that Plath was even conscious of the Phaeton myth's working presence while she wrote, and nothing in her simple, final; correction of the last three lines of "Sheep in Fog" suggests that she was conscious there of the Icarus myth that supplied both verbs, both nouns, and all three adjectives, as well as the situation. But in the drafts of this later poem those specific details of the scrapped chariot and the dead man lying on the moor are evidence that by then, at least, she understood all the connections, and that they mythic personality was in charge of the realistic plot of the poem – the ride on the moor. Clearly, by this point in her career these two myths, her early obsessions, had lost their Greek settings, their name, gone down the full five fathoms, and had become the expressive symbols of her own soul's story. (Hughes, *Shakespeare & the Goddess of Complete Being* 41-42)

Hughes' identification of the three poems Plath was trying to write within the one is worth a read. The first being "the original inspiration – lucid, realistic, and perfectible," the second being the one she actually wants to write, that of the image of patriarchal, Biblical sheep. He concludes with a striking observation:

Finally, it could be said that the poem she was left with, on 2 December, was a Treaty – a formal truce maintained under the tension between opposed and mutually hostile interests: the fourth kind of poem. Meanwhile, of course, we have glimpsed another kind of poem altogether, a fifth kind, a massive complex of images, of the kind that rises into the 'total statements' of epic and drama – the mythic poem of the chariot, the full subjective drama of her fate, that was pushed under, and sank away, and never did get written. Although, in a sense, the effort of this fifth poem to come into existence determined every word of the poem we have, and provided the final three lines by metamorphosing the myth of Phaeton into that of Icarus, it remains unknown. Just as those last three lines, and the final complete form, of 'Sheep in Fog' would have remained unknown if

she had died two weeks earlier. (Hughes, "Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog'" *Winter Pollen* 211).

Empathy is found in animals too, but what is not found is the ordination of cosmic coincidence, the power to think outside of the box and in the fifth dimension, to discover an answer to a problem by proleptic thought and then discover the problem itself by analeptic thought, a simple manipulation of time in the fifth dimension in order to make events happen against all statistical possibilities. In the symbolism of Tantric Yoga, Kali stands with her feet on the chest of the phallic god Siva,⁵ in an emblem of reversed sexual intercourse, which nevertheless produces an erection in Siva (as portrayed in numerous Indian temple carvings and medallions). This is arguably what Hughes is getting at when he writes of "Sheep in Fog" turning into a second poem becoming a third and carried away into a fourth poem, only then to burst forth into a fifth.

Plath had intended to read "Sheep in Fog" for the BBC, introducing it simply with "In the next poem, the speaker's horse is proceeding at a slow, cold walk down a hill of macadam to the stable at the bottom. It is December. It is foggy. In the fog there are sheep" (Plath, *Ariel: The Restored Edition* 196).⁶ Frieda Hughes makes particular mention of "Ariel" and "Sheep in Fog" and writes:

These introductions made me smile; they have to be the most understated commentaries imaginable for poems that are pared down to their sharpest points of imagery and delivered with tremendous skill. When I read them I imagine my mother, reluctant to undermine with explanation the concentrated energy she'd poured into her verse, in order to preserve its ability to shock and surprise. (Hughes, "Foreword" xv)

There are also the peculiar "far / Fields" in verse four which only so much as "threaten" with the uncanny image of a bewildering and isolated heaven "Starless and fatherless, a dark water," reiterating the inevitability of death, looking back in turn to the futility/mutability of life (Plath, *Collected Poems* 262). A truth also testified in Hughes' poems "Examination at the Womb-door" and "Life Is Trying to Be Life" (Hughes, *Collected Poems* 218, 553). Everyone must deal with

⁵ The serpent Vasuki is found in Hindu and Buddhist mythology, its sister Manasa is to be found in Chinese and Japanese mythology. The god Shiva in Hinduism is believed to be garlanded with 5 serpents that represent wisdom and eternity. Greta Garbo performs an exquisite Divine dance around the idol of Shiva in the 1931 film *Mata Hari*. Hughes' discussion of serpent imagery can be found in "The Snake in the Oak" (*Winter Pollen*, 458-464).

⁶ Plath described "Ariel" as "Another horseback riding poem, this one called 'Ariel', after a horse I'm especially fond of." Appendix II: Script for the BBC broadcast "New Poems by Sylvia Plath." *Ariel: The Restored Edition*. 195-197.

mortality on their own, perfected in time through entropy of disappearances which gloam the nowness of life back into existence; sex is also death. The immediate urgency of realisation of such emotions was once expressed by Plath when she said "I love the thinginess of things" (Stevenson 295). For at the very moment conception occurs the spermatozoa's tail is lopped off by the enclosing, enveloping womb so that it can no longer swim. Thus Eros and Thanatos are conjoined. The French for orgasm is *petit mort*!⁷

Given this, it is strange when Hughes tells us that Plath had to set aside "Sheep in Fog" alongside some other poems for another collection, surmising that perhaps this was because of her failure to adequately convey the "real meanings" or channels as evident in the facsimile drafts of "Sheep in Fog" which Hughes published in "Sylvia Plath: The Evolution of 'Sheep in Fog'" in *Winter Pollen* (193-197). Given, also, Plath's history and the time in her life this poem was written, the revised final verse (added later) is terrifying, and Hughes alludes to this when he writes:

That her new self, who could do so much, could not ultimately save her, is perhaps only to say what has often been learned on this particular field of conflict – that the moment of turning one's back on an enemy who seems safely defeated, and is defeated, is the most dangerous moment of all. And that there can be no guarantees. (*Winter Pollen* 189, 190).

"Sheep in Fog" spans the divide between what Hughes called the pre-1963 "Ariel voice" and the poems of 1963:

The later poems, which he decided to add to her collection, were not the voice of the escaped triumphant survivor, but a new voice, embittered and desperate, disabled by a new fatal combination of circumstances from coping with a last attack by the seemingly defeated forces. (Sagar 68)

⁷ See '[A Retrospective Appraisal of Hollace M. Metzger's 3VOIƆE](#)' by the author for deeper meanings.

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